

Baridi Night event draws attention to African refugees

Students forgo blankets for the evening as part of an effort to educate locals about a global issue

By [Pegah Yazdy](#)

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The Swahili word “baridi” can be translated to mean “cold,” but for some students it describes the feeling thousands of African refugees sleep with every night.

Students gathered in Tom Bradley International Hall Friday to attend Baridi Night, an event organized by a student group called Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment (FORGE) and meant to educate the community about the refugee situation in Zambia, highlighting the lack of resources such as blankets.

Ushma Vyas, a first-year political science and history student and a FORGE volunteer, said she feels it is a tragedy that there are thousands of people not living within their own homes, and beyond that, they don’t have the resources to live in comfort.

“I understand that I am privileged, and I feel that my privilege is something I need to utilize to help people around the world,” she said. “All the funds that we raise at this event are going to go toward educational supplies and blankets.”

Though Zambia has been a peaceful country since its independence in 1964, the refugees who live there are from neighboring countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola and Sudan, where there has recently been turmoil and war, said Holly Hickling, a FORGE volunteer.

The event featured artwork by refugees, video interviews with refugees, live music by African performers, traditional instruments, dancers, costumes, food, guests speakers and stations with games and activities for guests to participate in.

One such activity was called the Blanket of Thought, and participants were encouraged to express messages of hope and write their thoughts about the refugee situation in Zambia on pieces of cloth, which would be stitched together into a blanket and sent to Africa.

A documentary was also shown which chronicled the experiences of a group of refugees who started a musical band in their refugee camp.

Diana Essex, a fourth-year international developmental studies and African studies student is a project leader for FORGE and has been to Africa twice.

“What I have at the end of the day is the understanding that people can survive anything and that the human spirit is the most resilient thing I have ever witnessed,” Essex said.

FORGE has two branches consisting of a domestic program called Real Refuge, which educates the public and raises funds for refugees, and a program in Africa in which young people are selected to travel to that continent and implement their own programs for the refugee camps.

Essex said FORGE works with approximately 60,000 people in three refugee camps in Zambia and projects include preschool programs, a technology center, health care outreach and a repatriation information program which aids refugees in the process of returning home.

“Sitting in refugee camps, you have talent and spirit and hope and all the things you have here (in the U.S.), only in these extraordinary circumstances,” Essex said. “This summer I’m going back as a team leader and I will watch the unfolding of projects by people from the Los Angeles area.”

Jules Boyele, president of the Congolese Community of Southern California, was a speaker at the event.

Because the Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the richest countries in the region, foreign countries have exploited the resources there and, in the process, have created tensions within those countries, Boyele said.

“Things are shaking up all the time, and we just hope to get better leadership that will bring more stability,” Boyele said. “We have to teach people a lot about human rights, freedom and respecting others.”

On Friday night, a group of UCLA students pledged to sleep without blankets to symbolize the situation of refugees in Zambia who lack such resources in their camps.

Haining Ren, a fourth-year mathematics student, said though Africa seems very remote, she was saddened to hear about the conditions of the refugees living there.

“It’s kind of sad to know about all the things that are going on with the refugees there, but it’s good to hear that people are paying attention to it and doing something about it,” she said.

FORGE was started by a student in Stanford four years ago and has since spread nationally to college campuses in Boston, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles.

“You make a difference, not just by sleeping, but by informing yourself about what’s going on,” Boyele said. “When you see there is an injustice somewhere, that is a call for you to stand up and say, ‘I want to stop it. I want to help.’”